Put the Body to Good Use

June 5, 2018

We’ve gone to all this trouble to get a human body, so let’s do something good with it. The chant we had just now, reflecting on the different parts of the body, that’s that counteractive tendency that we have in our culture and all human cultures. If you want to do something good with a body, it depends on its looking good and their idea of doing good something with a body. It doesn’t really lead anywhere. Often it leads down. Whereas, if you look at the body, not so much in terms of what it looks like outside or what it even looks like to you as you visualize itself to yourself, but in terms of how you feel the body as a whole. The body from within can become a basis for the path to the end of suffering. If you want to do something really noble with a body, you can focus on the breath as you feel it, noticing there are no clear boundaries in the body. The breath is here, another part of the body is not breath. Actually, your whole experience of the body is breath. Think of that. Everywhere you might focus in the body, there’s breath there. So you’re surrounded. Then you want your awareness to fill the body. Try to get the sense of breath filling the body and a sense of ease as well. This way you’ve got all three of the first frames of reference for establishing mindfulness. Body, feelings, mind. They’re all here together, interpenetrating one another. All too often, as we start out, we think that we’re in one part of the body looking at the breath and another part of the body. But if you could think about it surrounding you, you’re in the midst of the body and your awareness is whole body. The breath is whole body. So it’s not just your eyes looking at the breath, but it’s your whole body sensing the breath. There’s an awareness of the breath in the stomach, there’s an awareness of the breath in the knees, in the feet. It’s not like you’re a bird perched up here inside your head looking down at the rest of the body. The whole body is able to know, or your awareness can be in any part of the body. So let the breath bathe that. Breathe in a way that feels good. And notice when you breathe in which direction the energy flow tends to go. Sometimes the energy flowing up feels good, sometimes it gets stuck in the head and you get headaches and get blurry. In which case, you have to think of the breath going down. The monk used to suffer from pretty bad headaches. One of his ways of dealing with that was to think of the breath going down the back and then going out the tailbone down into the earth. That sense of feeling rooted in the earth is almost like a lightning rod wire. Let the sense of excess energy in the head go down and out. There are lots of different ways that you can visualize the energy in the breath. And you’re learning that the good things in the body have nothing to do with whether it looks good or not. It’s simply a matter of how you’re aware, which is something anybody can do. Be fully aware all through the body. Think of the breath all through the body. And then try to maintain that sense of awareness. Keep it going. This is where the fourth frame of reference comes in, dhammas, which is actually a set of different frames of reference that you can apply as need be. The word dhamma can mean mental quality, it can mean teaching, it can mean idea. There are ways of looking at issues that are going to arise as you try to get the mind to settle down and keep it settled down. If you’re running into any hindrances, sensual desire, ill will, sloth, and torpor, thinking in terms of the hindrances is a good, useful framework for dealing with things like that. Because all too often when sensual desire or ill will comes into the mind, the first thought is not, “This is a hindrance.” The first thought is, “Is there any entertainment value here? Am I in the mood for ill will? Am I in the mood for sensual desire?” We don’t see them as hindrances. We don’t see them as obstacles. We see them as opportunities. But as the Buddha said, there are opportunities for doing lots of unskillful things. If your mind keeps going in those ruts, it’s hard to get it out. And then after thinking about these things a lot, it tends to come back to your words and your deeds. So keep in mind the framework that these are hindrances. Once you recognize them as a hindrance, then try to remember, in the past, when you had this hindrance coming into the mind, how did you deal with it? What ways of thinking were able to nip sensual desire in the bud, or ill will? What ways of working with the breath? What ways of focusing the mind on different topics helped deal with sloth and torpor? How can you give rise to a sense of well-being in the mind? And the same way, argue with the voices that say that you should be worried about this, or upset about that, or doubtful about this side of the other thing. That’s one framework you can keep in mind. Another one that’s useful is the seven factors for awakening. When you’re mindful, what are you supposed to do with that mindfulness? You’re supposed to figure out what’s skillful and what’s not skillful arising in the mind. If anything unskillful is coming into the mind, you try to get rid of it. If anything skillful is coming into the mind, you try to encourage it. Learn how to divide your thoughts into two types, the way the Buddha did leading up to his awakening. And again, you’re not looking so much at the content. You’re looking at what mind-state is leading to these thoughts, what mind-state likes to entertain these thoughts, and where these thoughts will lead you if you continue to produce them. Or, as they say in Thai, continue to weave them. So you look at the thoughts as part of a causal process, where they come from, where they’re going. And again, you divide them into two types, the skillful ones you encourage and the unskillful ones you don’t. You try to cut off. As for the skillful ones, you encourage them to the point where they lead you back to concentration. Sometimes some thinking is useful to get the mind to settle down or to deal with a problem that comes up. And then when that problem is solved, then you can go back to just being as still as possible with the breath, in such a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness inside. That fullness comes from allowing the breath to allow the blood, in turn, to spread out all through the body. Nothing is squeezed out. Watch the breath process to see if you tend to squeeze it a little bit at the end of the out-breath or squeeze it at the end of the in-breath, as a marker to let you know that the out-breath has now stopped, the in-breath is now beginning. You don’t need to squeeze things. You don’t need that marker. Think of the in- and out-breaths flowing into each other. There don’t need to be clearly defined. Once you stop squeezing the body, then a sense of fullness is bound to come, and this allows the mind to settle down. So in this way, use that framework of the factors for awakening, those words, those ideas, those concepts, to help you to figure out how to get the mind to settle down. And any problem that comes up, you can figure out what to do with it. So this is how, as the Buddha said, the practice of mindfulness leads to right concentration. Right mindfulness leads to right concentration. They’re not radically separate practices, as you sometimes hear. In fact, the instructions for how to get into concentration are there in the description of right mindfulness. It’s simply a matter of learning how to read them. And then learn how to use those instructions to get in touch with the sense of the body as you feel it from within. It’s this part of the body that can become the path. Because it’s right here in the present moment where the mind and the body meet at the breath. So don’t let your awareness get too far away from the body, or your thoughts get too far away from the body. You want to be as fully in the body as possible. Because it’s here that awakening can happen. This is how we get good use out of the body. Remembering that we put a lot of effort into becoming human beings to get a human body, so use it for a good purpose. Don’t waste it on the endless hunt for sensual pleasures. Use it for something that really does provide genuine well-being for the mind. And every body can do this. Whether it’s viewed as attractive or unattractive conventionally. This is one of the ways in which all bodies are equal.

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